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WATCHMAN WHAT OF THE NIGHT?

By Henry Beston

Like a first ominous sound of the cracking of wood in a building which will presently subside in a cloud and a column of dust, the disaster in Britain comes as a warning to Americans to be of more realistic mind.

Politics have clearly become a secondary consideration, being at their worst little more than an ignoble struggle for the control of ruins. What is now of first, of unparalleled importance, is that human mood and way of life called civilization. The essential question, moreover, is not in what form European civilization will survive, but whether after such an attack of violence and conquest it can survive.

At the moment--and the issues must be faced--great areas of the Continent are ebbing out of civilization: some, like the East Prussian marches, descending into such a barbarism of brute force and depopulation as once darkened the Sixth Century frontiers of enfeebled Rome; others, like Hungary, relapsing into poverty and misery.

What are the historical influences and factors at work in the ruins? Civilizations die when their physical world is broken beyond the residual power of the civilization to repair, when the people who knew how to work and administer them are gone, and when a new system of values turns the old way of life into gestures and rubbish. No civilization has ever survived the impact of these factors of dissolution, and our only proper guide to some foreknowledge of the future is an honest analysis of how far these given forces are present in the Europe of the rubble heaps.

II

America being in no mood for a peace by negotiation, and the Axis having fortified the coasts of "Fortress Europe," the Anglo-American attack on the Axis Powers was essentially a war on Europe as an entity. Impartial as the rain, the bombs fell on the just and the unjust, on allies willing and unwilling, and on the territory of the occupied nations.

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No analysis of contemporary Europe can be honest without some consideration of the character of these air attacks. Though now and then bombing raids were made on specific objectives of military value to the enemy, the truth is that the camouflaged "missions" to the European Continent were historically nothing more than blind adventures in violence. They were specifically and frankly aimed at the destruction by fire of the great Central European cities and the terrorizing of others within reach.

That civilization might perish of such savagery never seems to have obtained a moment's consideration. Mr. Churchill admiringly reported that Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris was "pitiless" and had "a tiger's heart." For Britain the policy was an Elizabethan fifth act of revenge followed by suicide. A mercantile nation cannot afford to massacre its customers.

The result in Europe is a breakdown of the apparatus of civilization. Civilization needs its physical bases and props. It does not consist merely of libraries, universities, schools, museums, art galleries and opera houses, but these are body to its spirit. Of the great city of Berlin (one of the treasure houses of the Western mind), in terms of scientific buildings and great museums, next to nothing remains, and we shall be more honest with ourselves if we admit that it has ceased to exist.

Such a city as Dresden belonged neither to Hitler, nor to Mr. Winston Churchill, nor to Mr. Roosevelt. It belonged to the human spirit and the inheritance of Western man. His inheritance sacked, the physical basis of European culture reduced to a ghost of itself, the present-day European of the fought-over regions has fallen back into indifference. "We who are about to die are bored." The worst ruin of the war is Man himself.

III

The pattern of civilization which was established in the European States of the later Nineteenth Century was distinctly a middle-class affair. Middle-class leadership and a middle-class bureaucracy took over the way of life and, firmly in the saddle, controlled everything in its world from education to the design of prefectures. The proletariat had begun to read, but it was not yet a power.

The years of unrest and economic disaster following the frock coats and professional eloquence of Versailles mark the visible breakdown of this middle-class political and cultural empire. Its classes were slipping downhill, the middle class losing its foothold and the lower middle class becoming a social region of the proletariat. But

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meanwhile universal education and the new temper had produced a new world of the young.

To those acquainted with European conventions, the most important issue of the new temper was the revolt, conscious and unconscious, against the traditional class system of Europe. It is singular indeed that this point has been so ignored for, without it, there is no understanding of Fascism or National Socialism as European movements. They were not politically egalitarian movements, they were socially egalitarian movements, and as such they were new in the Europe which had taken shape in the conservative reaction following 1848. Awaiting some proper definition of "democracy," these social experiments gave their peoples the only "democracy" they had ever known. Coming to power, the regimes exterminated their enemies with modern ruthlessness, converted or coerced a proletariat with strong Communist tendencies, and set sail for ultimate disaster.

Today not only is the middle-class empire a ruin, but the middle class itself is being "liquidated." The attempt at a middle-class, nationalist world has failed, and the middle-class European stands against the immensity of his disaster. A chaotic world of the black market, starving children, mink coats, and cigarette currency surrounds him, but he does not really care. He knows well that the middle class will never again be in position to make a decision for civilization. For him, the road to a proletarian world is seemingly the only road left open by the bombs.

IV

In such a crisis, a threatened civilization has but one last recourse, a final stand upon the moral values which have made possible its way of life. Who will be bold enough to maintain that our tradition of moral values is today capable of defense? The truth is that the structure of Christendom is broken and that the traditional Western ethic connected with the traditional faith is fighting for its right to be practiced and increasingly for its right to exist.

The new ethic has already taken over the conscience of the West, whether it will or no. The materialistic atheism, whose sources are the modern alienation from Nature, the breakdown of the religious and poetic side of Man and the deterministic influences of the machine, is, indeed, well on its way to victory. The West has fought a war of savagery and cruelty beyond the pale of the Western ethic and even of the ultimate human decencies.

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The ruins of Europe are a part of this world of spiritual dissolution. Perhaps nothing today is of greater historical importance than the fact that if America and the Western democracies are to remain true to Western values, they must face both a political and an ethical battle. The importance of the rise of a new ethic cannot be overstated.

There is one prophecy which can be boldly made without fear of historical contradiction. The great wide new world of the world planners is going to be a very shrunken one. The great cities of Europe will never be rebuilt. Modern cities are the children of the Nineteenth Century process; they represent the loot of Nature and the earth as that treasure was delivered over to the new energies of the scientific age and the new technology--and this era of history is over and done.

In our enormous island of America we have not yet really experienced the results of our almost gay destruction of our civilized heritage. But overseas the result translates itself into the news that British coal production is back to the level of 1897, and that the Government is trying to get Polish expatriates and German war-helots to mine the coal their own people will not dig. Historically, such a use of helots is always a sign of dissolution. Germany is slowly being starved, and is slowly dying of that starvation. France is biologically dead, and its politics are the politics of that condition. America, so to speak, stands in an all-time high of confusion and Messianic unrealism, facing a stage dawn from which the power will presently be shut off.

The world which followed the crash of Rome was a slum world of great cities decayed to slum townships and populated by slum dwellers who were little more than urban savages. Will there be a new Monte Cassino to preserve the debris of our age as the old Monte Cassino saved from total dispersion the debris of the Roman imperial civilization, or are the hideous ruins of the monastery a symbol and a warning?

The cumulative effect of what has been done, the deadly danger ahead, is the breaking of the tradition of civilization. If this catastrophe is to be averted, the human spirit will have to keep complete intellectual honesty, courage, and devotion at its side, together with something to give it hope. Much can be expected, but it is certainly an hour not to expect too much.

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Not Merely Gossip *A Supplement to* Human Events VOL. IV, NO. 15

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By Frank C. Hanighen April 9, 1947

A letter -- not released to the press -- from Acting Secretary of State Dean Acheson to Secretary of War Patterson, on March 19, has renewed a bitter feud between these two departments of the Government, and may have profound effects on hemispheric defense. In the letter, Acheson threw down the gage to Patterson with the words: "Passage of a bill such as H.R. 6326, with its widely recognized objective of standardizing the armaments of the American Republics by the transfer of United States equipment, cannot fail . . . to face this government with two wholly undesirable consequences. . . ." Last year, State reluctantly supported the measure; now Acheson reverses that concurrence.

The bill mentioned is the War Department's cherished project and represents its attempt to put into practice one of its basic principles for the defense of the United States. The Department and American officers on the Inter-American Defense Board insist on priority for defense in this hemisphere. They support, of course, other military and diplomatic measures of defense in other parts of the world; but hemispheric defense comes first, to their way of thinking. The new Arctic defense plan is one part of this policy; the arming of the Latin-American Republics by one co-ordinated plan is another.

In this effort, War has collided with State, which has sought to subordinate inter-American defense and diplomacy to global arrangements. Also, State places inter-American economic relations and the domestic conditions in Latin-American countries ahead of U.S. military policy. The "two wholly undesirable consequences" which Acheson mentions in his letter are: "We shall encourage expenditures for armaments by the other American Republics which will weaken their economies and therefore their political stability, and we shall be called upon by the poorer countries to subsidize the program at great cost to this government. . . . Encouragement of expenditures on arms by the Latin-American countries runs directly counter to our basic economic and political policies which aim to encourage an improvement in the living standards and economic welfare of those countries. The sacrifices which all of the Latin-American countries would be required to make under the proposed program would drastically limit or defer their effectuation of plans for industrialization, improvement of transportation, production of strategic materials needed by the United States, and correction of presently poor conditions of public health, education and social welfare."

To Mr. Acheson's persuasive arguments, War advances its own strong rebuttal as follows: Few Latin-American governments, regardless of their financial position, could survive without arms, since most of them are military dictatorships. They will get arms, willy-nilly, if not from us, from other Powers in the world. They may get arms from Russia, thereby giving Communist Russia a strong, if not predominant, influence in countries on our doorstep. We have promised arms to these governments; if we renege, our prestige will be lowered. Withdrawal of our promise would lead to withdrawal of our military missions in these countries, with further loss of good will. On the other hand, if the United States supplies the arms and standardizes them, Latin-American defense forces will have to come to the United States for repairs and replacements. Our military security will therefore be ensured. It is understood that Mr. Patterson has replied to Mr. Acheson embodying some of these points.

The War Department speaks with some assurance, for it is not unmindful that George B. Marshall, when Chief of Staff, was a firm backer of this Department project. There is no reason to believe that Marshall has changed his position since

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he became Secretary of State. Therefore, a question arises: Will Marshall, on his return from Moscow, clash with his Undersecretary on this important matter?

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Official circles in Washington find it remarkable that Britain is making such a fuss over Mr. Henry Wallace's visit. Mr. Wallace, it is reported, will be received by the Prime Minister. And the BBC has made available to the former American Secretary of Commerce its best radio "spot" -- Sunday evening at 9 p.m. when every British family listens. This was the radio time used by Prime Minister Winston Churchill for some of his epochal speeches during the war; and by other important figures.

Furthermore, there is astonishment because Mr. Wallace, over the Government-controlled BBC, will presumably criticize the U.S. Government's Greek-Turkish policy -- a policy for which the British Government bears no small responsibility. The official version here is that the British Government's "SOS" on Greece inspired Mr. Truman to launch the policy which now draws Wallace's fire. The question is naturally asked: Has the British Government chosen this indirect method to express disapproval of the Truman policy?

Surprise is expressed at the British assumption that Mr. Wallace is of great political importance in the United States today. The leader of the Left Wing faction of the Left Wing of the Democratic Party is not exactly a towering figure in the American political scene. Perhaps, it is suggested, the uproar over Wallace is somewhat like the American attitude towards Professor Harold Laski. Because Laski had won prominence in the United States by his lectures and writings, Americans jumped to the conclusion that he was a great national personality in Britain -- a delusion which amused the British. Apparently, the British public has formed a similarly erroneous idea of Wallace.

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Errors were even last week as between Republicans and Democrats. Republican Chairman Carroll Reece rashly predicted that the result of Chicago's municipal election would be important in the national picture -- and the Democratic mayoralty candidate forthwith won a big victory. Democratic Chairman Gael Sullivan hastened to note this fact, with a great publicity flourish, stressing Mr. Reece's unfortunate prophecy. Mr. Sullivan himself then proceeded to snub Messrs. Wallace and Pepper, got roundly spanked by Mr. Truman for his pains and had to "eat crow." Smart party bosses do not take steps to exclude any groups from supporting the ticket, no matter how distasteful such elements may be.

Apart from Mr. Reece's blunder, the Chicago result was not as discouraging to Republicans as popularly supposed. In the aldermanic elections, the Republicans increased their strength in the city council to the highest point in the last 10 years and the Democratic majority sharply declined. Furthermore, observers noted that the Republicans won some Polish and Negro wards, normally Democratic. Republican Headquarters could take some comfort from the fact that the victorious Democratic candidate for mayor, Mr. Martin H. Kennelly, was a party irregular, abjured the Democratic machine and ran 100,000 votes ahead of the Democratic machine ticket.

But, nonetheless, Republicans have reason to search their souls. They put up a nonentity, Russell W. Root, after some damaging inter-party squabbling. They ran the campaign on a narrow partisan appeal, a disastrous strategy in view of the fact that the Republican machine is still small and weak. The Democratic opponent, on the other hand, played for the independent vote and his program of municipal reform

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provided a rallying point for "good government" supporters. In short, Republicans can now see that they can not win with "just anybody" -- and that applies not only in municipal elections.

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The President is expected to follow up his Greek-Turkish project with a request to grant China a $500 million loan which has already been earmarked in the Export-Import Bank. Some friends of Nationalist China believe that any such loan should be intelligently supervised by America. They do not question the amount, nor the propriety of making such money available to our former ally. But, like many others, they fear that the United States will overstrain its resources and economy if it indiscriminately pours money into China, not to mention other foreign lands. If the loan is made outright, without some direction from Washington, much of the money may be wasted.

They therefore propose spending the proceeds of the loan on one area in China -- developing its resources, repairing war-torn plants, improving roads and other communications. The Tientsin-Peiping area is indicated as one most likely to respond to this treatment. As pointed out in this column on August 28, the territory between the Yellow River and Manchuria is rich in minerals: coal, iron, tungsten, manganese, etc. One of the richest iron mines in the world is located not more than 90 miles from Peiping. Intensive rehabilitation and development of this one area, it is believed, would create a healthy economic nucleus from which recovery and prosperity would spread to adjoining regions. Certainly, it is pointed out, this would be a cheaper and more effective means of combatting Communism than waging civil war.

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One of the foreign directors of the World Bank remarked about the new regime under Mr. J. J. McCloy: "It would not be entirely inaccurate to say that Lazard Freres moved out with the resignation of President Eugene Meyer and that the Chase National Bank moved in with Mr. McCloy."

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Attempts at formation of a Green International in Eastern Europe to combat the Red International are reported. Leaders of the new peasant organization are as follows: Mikolaczyk, of Poland; Maniu, of Romania; Dimitrov, of Bulgaria (not to be confused with the Comintern figure of the same name); and Matchek, of Yugoslavia -- all chiefs of agrarian parties of their States. It is reported that the Green International is preparing a manifesto to be published soon. Uncertainty, however, exists as to whether all four leaders will meet to launch the organization publicly. Mikolaczyk and Maniu are still in their respective lands; while Matchek lives in Paris and Dimitrov in the United States. The manifesto may be issued by the two leaders in exile, with the names of the two others attached. It will proclaim, it is believed, a Federation of Peasant States in opposition to Soviet Russia and Communism.

It is recalled that the contemplated organization had a precursor, the Green International which held its first meeting in Passau, Austria, in 1920, and which died with the world economic depression. The first International was a by-product of agrarian power which rose sharply after World War I. Before that war, the basis of political and economic power rested in the cities and industry; but the aftermath of the 1914-18 war, marked by lack of food and industrial breakdown, shifted power to the peasants. In all of these Eastern European countries during the post-World War I era, save Hungary, the peasant parties won agrarian reform, expropriation of big estates and distribution of land to landless peasants. The new Green International seems to spring from nationalistic reaction against Soviet occupation and satellite government rather than from the desire for agrarian reform; and also from peasant opposition to collectivization of the land.

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Notes and Quotes

From an Austrian woman living in the Russian zone of Germany we have received the following affecting appeal: "I'm without any sign of life of my husband since January 1945 and of my brother since August 1944, who were on the Eastern front. But I know from wounded comrades that they must have come into Russian captivity at that time. I write you in the name of many thousands of unhappy Austrian and German women and mothers, who never got a sign of life from their husbands and fathers till now, after the terriblest of all wars. Bitter and very hard for us is the life with our poor children. We must work for them and must leave them alone all the days and therefore the education will be neglected.

"While all the prisoners of war in the West are allowed to write to their relatives I must always again learn from returned prisoners from Russia, who are ill, that a very great deal of prisoners got no opportunity to write till now and that the postal conditions in Russia are very deficient. The torments of our souls are great and also we at home are very oppressed by the care about our dear ones. Our husbands become discouraged and therefore indifferent like animals and finally become ill. I think in my mind the Soviet Union would do better to look at the model of her allied Western Nations to create humanity in this matter, so that the pretended 'calumnies' about 'iron curtains' can be put away for all time. Dear Sir, in the name of all these unhappy women, I beg you heartily, please, write an article about this unjust matter."

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"The economists and the other experts discuss state-trading in technical and beautiful language; no constellation of words, however, can alter the fact that government monopoly in external trade cannot for long exist except in combination with government monopoly in domestic business. You can start at either end, if you decide to substitute government control for private freedom of enterprise." The Hon. Ray Atherton, U. S. Ambassador to Canada, in a speech to the Canadian Lumberman's Association (reported in the Verner OTTAWA Letter, February 17.)

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Sagittarius, the inimitable versifier of the London New Statesman and Nation (March 15) parodies Browning's famous poem, under the new title of "How They Brought the Bad News. . ." The final stanzas contain some satire applicable to other countries than Britain:

"The moment," Cripps said, "is undoubtedly dark,
The present is anxious, the future is stark,
But the future is grey if the present is black,
And nobody wants the Conservatives back,
The Government's planning is hardly to blame
And the remedy offered is more of the same;
A long-term emergency now has been planned
And planners will plan under Planning Command.
The crisis requires no emotional call--
We can stand fifty years with our backs to the wall."

So "Forward!" Cripps cried, and the table he smote,
And presently carried a confidence vote,
And Members flocked round, and they cheered as of old,
(There is no one like Cripps when bad news must be told)
While the citizens said, giving Whitehall its due,
"In spite of all planning, we'll still muddle through."

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